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ABSTRACT

Two principles of progressive education can be of particular value to meaningful educational reform in the 1980's: first, good education is holistic, inevitably and continuously connecting the learner to that which is to be learned; and second, good education can take many alternative forms. Putting the first of these principles into practice involves (1) relating course content to students' abilities to comprehend and use the subject matter, (2) focusing on student acquisition of knowledge rather than of information, and (3) avoiding teaching basic skills like reading and writing outside of the experiential context in which the skills are typically used. The second principle stands as a warning against seeking a perfect form of education that will work for everyone. Studies of schools offering experimental, progressive, and open education have indicated that, although students may not always obtain higher achievement scores at elementary and secondary levels, they may be better prepared to display the initiative required to take effective advantage of college and other postsecondary opportunities. It is significant that, despite a lack of coverage in the media, alternative educational programs are increasing and succeeding. (PGD)

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PROGRESSIVE EDUCATION AND QUALITATIVE REFORM

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PROGRESSIVE EDUCATION AND QUALITATIVE REFORM

John Arnold

In the early 1800's, there were serious yellow fever epidemics in the southeastern United States. In one village, the town council decided the best way to combat the disease was to cleanse the air by firing the town cannon. The cannon was duly fired, but alas, the epidemic continued to spread. So the council met again, this time with great consternation. After much debate, it determined the best recourse was to fire two cannons.

I greatly fear that many of the solutions being offered to cure the malaise in education today amount to little more than firing a second cannon. Commisions on reform, researchers, school boards and the public at large advocate doing more of the same thing that we've been doing: increase the school day; lengthen the school year; add more courses; give more homework; give more tests; increase time on task; and above all, concentrate more on basic skills.

While some of these suggestions may help under proper circumstances, quantitative proposals alone can never solve what are primarily qualitative problems. Too many classrooms in this country are already joyless places where students face never-ending supplies of worksheets, where monitoring and managing have replaced teaching, and where genuine inquiry is non-existent. Many of the reform proposals, if implemented, may well accentuate, not ameliorate, these conditions.

In contrast to the neo-scientific management vision of educational excellence being heralded today, consider Paul Gaston's description of his student days at the Fairhope School, one of the country's great progressive schools.

> Before I had a university professorship, wrote a book, received a Ph.D, won a Fulbright to study abroad, and graduated from the college of my choice, I spent fifteen years (three of them as a kindergartener) working in wood, clay, leather, and silver; singing; acting; folk dancing; playing sports and games of all sorts... all in a school where these things were thought to be as educational--as basic--as reading and mathematics.
>
> The founder of our school--a remarkable woman named Marietta Johnson--always said, "Education is growth." By this she meant that education should not be training or preparation for future demands, but the proper nurturing of immediate needs of the whole organism. She called her idea "organic education" and she strongly believed that no part of a child's development could be isolated from another without the danger of warping the child. The spiritual, mental, and physical must must always be kept in balance: stressing one to the detriment of another would damage the whole child...
>
> We had no tests or marks in pottery or drama--everyone understood we did those things because we liked them--

> and it worked the same way for Spanish and Shakespeare; we studied them because we wanted to, without being ranked, compared, and classified. One of our major articles of faith was that learning is its own reward.
>
> There were certainly standards--we all knew we were expected to do our best...(but)...we were deeply mistrustful of measuring and comparing. There was discipline, too. We were not a "do as you please" school. But the discipline we had was not imposed by rules and regulations, fear of punishment or lust for reward. It was self-discipline that emerged quite naturally from our confidence in the school and in ourselves and our keen sense of what was right and what was wrong.[1]

Obviously times have changed, making it virtually impossible to create another Fairhope. Nevertheless, it is essential that we keep alive a vision of education which challenges students to think, explore, and create while developing self-discipline and sound values. Those of us with roots in progressive education are by no means the only ones with a stake in this venture. We do, however, have a uniquely rich heritage of solid theory and concrete school experience upon which to draw.

There are two principles of progressive education which need particular emphasis if we are to contribute to meaningful reform in the 1980's: 1) Good education is holistic, inevitably and continuously connecting the learner and that which is to be learned, and 2) Good education takes many forms. Diversity is a strength, not a weakness. Alternatives have been successful in the past and are needed more than ever today.

As early as 1902 John Dewey[2] made clear in brilliant fashion the folly of pitting the child against the curriculum. He acknowledged that there is a genuine problem to be resolved. The child (and to a great extent the adolescent) is often concerned with his/her own needs and feelings, is wedded to the concrete, has fluctuating interests, and tends to seek immediate gratification. The subject disciplines, on the other hand, have their own internal logic and have been developed and organized for adult purposes. As repositories of the wisdom of the ages, they extend far beyond the students' interests and frames of reference. However, the solution is not to set up armed camps, one under the banner "child-centered education," the other under "subject-centered education." The former risks producing spoilt students lacking in rigor, well-developed skills, and interests; the latter risks being rigid and irrelevant, producing bored or apathetic drones.

The solution, Dewey tells us, is to connect student and curriculum. The subject disciplines must be "psychologized" to relate to students' world views and levels of ability. Their basic principles and inherent logic have to become alive. Conversely, students must be led (not managed!) to understand that the material "out there" originated through human beings using the same sensory mechanisms and thought processes they have, or will develop, to investigate the world. They must act upon the curriculum, not passively absorb it. However, experience per se does not produce learning. Good experience is necessary, i.e., experience which opens doors and promotes growth. Obviously, highly skilled teachers are required to accomplish all of this. The difficulties involved in finding and educating such teachers are scarcely touched upon by most current reformers.

The erroneous tendency to equate information with knowledge graphically illustrates the discontinuity between student and curriculum today. Charity James[3] reminds us that information is a

commodity, external to the learner. Knowledge involves a process whereby information is internalized and placed within a personal framework. It arises from a question-and-answer process, and encompasses thinking, feeling, and at times, doing.

A major tragedy is that much schooling deals only with isolated information. Often it is unrelated both to the principles of its own discipline and the learner's frame of reference. As a result, students are bombarded with answers to questions they have never asked. The process and content of learning, by nature integrally related, are torn asunder.

To improve the situation, we must insist that a significant portion of time be devoted to exploring students' own questions as well as those of the teacher, professor X, or McGraw-Hill. In so doing, we must engage students in activities which people in a discipline actually do. Thus, social studies students, like real historians, might form hypotheses, investigate original records, and interview people in the community, coming up with their own versions of history.

An even more serious distortion which separates the learner and the curriculum is the widespread tendency to confine basic skills to those items which can be broken down into small units and measured "objectively." Measurement is fast becoming the tale that wags the dog. As a result, the curriculum is trivialized and the student is denigrated.

Consider reading. Instead of reading real books and articles, students are buried in workbooks, ditto sheets, and learning kits. Instead of interacting with teachers and peers about major issues, morals, and mysteries, they are dividing words into syllables, underlining the schwa sound, or naming the color of Aunt Minnie's coat. Instead of being evaluated relative to the amount they read, the enjoyment they derive from it, or the important understandings they have achieved, they are assessed by multiple choice formats of isolated "skills." Speaking, reading and writing are dissociated, and all three are divorced from the students' experience.

Fundamental reading skills must certainly be taught and learned, but not in isolation from the overall reading process. There is ample evidence to show that people who in fact read a lot will improve significantly in terms of their comprehension, vocabulary, and speech. It must be pointed out, too, that the National Assessment of Educational Progress has found that basic, lower level reading skills have actually increased over the past 10 years. It is the higher level thinking skills--the abilities to draw inferences, to analyze, and to evaluate reading--which have declined. These are skills which evolve primarily through serious reading and dialogue.

With regard to writing, perhaps the situation is even worse. Grammar lessons and other easily measured tasks consume inordinate amounts of time, despite evidence that when taught in isolation, they do not improve writing appreciably. Conversely, little time is spent on actual writing, the activity which would most improve it. One reason for the anomaly, I believe, can be again traced to the mania for measuring and marking. Teachers have been persuaded that they must mark every dot and tittle a student writes with a red pencil. Since secondary teachers instruct from 50-150 students per day, only masochists will require students to write much if they feel compelled to correct everything.

There are, however, many strategies we can use to allow students to write on a daily basis. To mention a few: classes can be organized as writing workshops, with small groups of students discussing their writings with peers and making

their own revisions. Or, papers can be graded by teachers for selected aspects of grammar or style one day, for different aspects on other days. Also, parents can become involved, with students asked to write compositions especially for them or other family members.

A truism: to learn a skill or a talent, one has to be fully involved in it. If you want to be a dancer, you've got to dance. If you want to be a reader or writer, you've got to read or write. A sports analogy may be helpful in putting the skills issue into perspective. A boy tries out for the basketball team because he wants to play the game. The coach must design drills to teach basic fundamentals. But if the drills are unrelated to an offensive and defensive system and consume all of every practice session, the player may become disheartened and quit. The wise coaches intermingles drills and scrimmages with the play of the game always in focus. In reading and writing, the sad fact is that the drills have become the game.

The second principle of progressive education under discussion, that quality education takes diverse forms, can scarcely be over-emphasized in today's climate. Mary Anne Raywid[4] points out that much current reform rhetoric assumes that sameness will lead to excellence. Thus there is a quest for a blueprint, a curricular system which is best for all students. The simplistic nature of this quest is obvious and needs little elaboration here. Students are vastly different in terms of their goals, interests, abilities, and quirks, as are their teachers; schools and communities have unique characteristics, pressures, and opportunities. One uniform system will hardly accommodate these realities.

While advocating diversity, it is imperative that we combat the notion that diversity is the cause of educational ills. The influence of progressive education and of other alternative forms of education is frequently blamed for declining achievement, lowered standards, undesirable personality traits, and a host of other wrongs. The fact that only a small percent of our schools have ever been involved in alternative education and that massive social changes and confused values have affected all our schools' needs to be asserted forcefully. Further, we need to show that alternative education can significantly contribute to substantive reform, and that when implemented well, it can be highly successful.

The most compelling evidence comes from the Eight-Year Study which was completed in 1940 under the auspices of the Progressive Education Association and the U.S. Office of Education. The study compared the college accomplishments of over 1500 graduates from experimental secondary schools with a similar number of carefully matched graduates of conventional schools. The 30 experimental schools and the 25 participating colleges had made a pact whereby schools pledged to enlist students in curricular planning, to provide learning options, and to involve faculty in policy decisions. On their part, the colleges waved test scores, Carnegie units, and other usual admissions criteria, accepting experimental students primarily on their school's recommendations. The outcome was rather remarkable. The experimental students' performance was supperior to that of the control students in terms of grade average, academic honors won, leadership positions held, intellectual curiosity and drive, active concern about world events, and a host of other variables. Further analysis of data showed that students from the schools judged most experimental had markedly higher attainment than did those from schools deemed less experimental.

Another source of evidence comes from studies of open education, a direct descendant of progressive education.

Contrary to popular wisdom, research does not show open education to be a failure. While its effectiveness varies significantly among individual studies (most of which have serious methodological problems), the overall results indicate that open education yields achievement scores about the same as conventional education, but slightly higher measures of self-concept attitudes towards school, and other effective measures. Robert Horowitz[5], who reviewed some 75 studies, offers the most comprehensive analysis. Though few follow-up studies have been done on graduates of open-education programs, those which have been undertaken reveal that most students are prepared and well able to cope when they move on to conventional schools.[6]

Ignas and Corsini[7] also offer evidence of the effectiveness of distinct alternative systems, such as Montessori education, Individually Guided Education, Individual Education, and several psychotherapeutically based models. Finally, studies of alternative public schools are generally positive, with some individual schools--such as the Career Study Center in St. Paul, Minnesota--achieving spectacular results. Judging from the lack of media coverage alternative schools have received recently, one might suppose such schools are on the verge of dying out. To the contrary, they are alive, well, and growing. According to a recent survey[8], their numbers have perhaps tripled over the past eight years, their student bodies are diverse, and they are cost-effective. Moreover, attendance is up, school climate is positive, and teacher morale is exceptionally high.

While not all of the schools in the studies mentioned above fully espouse progressive education philosophy, the majority of them use concepts and methods which have much more kinship to it than to tenets of conventional education. In any event, the point is not to resurrect progressive education as the model for reform. What I have sought to show is that two of its principles, holism and diversity, are exceedingly relevant to current dialogue about reform. Quality education will not come about through stuffing students' heads with more and more isolated information and "skills," nor will it emerge through the establishment of some uniform system.

Our ultimate concern should be not with ideologies, models, or test scores, but simply with the question, "What is good education for our children?" Fifteen years ago I heard David Purpel say, "The most radical thing we could possibly do in education would be genuinely to educate kids." I believed it then; I believe it today.

Notes

[1]Paul Gaston, "Can We Be Saved from School Changers?" SOUTHERN CHANGES, July, 1983, pp. 10-11.

[2]John Dewey. THE CHILD AND THE CURRICULUM. (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1902.)

[3]Charity James. BEYOND CUSTOMS. (New York: Agathon Press, 1974)

[4]Mary Anne Raywid. "Schools of Choice: Their Current Nature and Prospects," PHI DELTA KAPPAN, June, 1983, pp. 684-688.

[5]Robert Horowitz. PSYCHOLOGICAL EFFECTS OF OPEN CLASSROOM TEACHING ON PRIMARY SCHOOL CHILDREN: A REVIEW OF RESEARCH. (Grand Forks, N.C.: Univ. of North Dakota Press, 1976.)

[6]For a particularly well documented follow-up study, see Chris Stevenson, "A Phenomenological Study of Perceptions About Open Education Among Graduates of Fayerweather Street School, Cambridge, Mass." Unpublished doctoral dissertation, University of Connecticut, 1979.

Notes (Continued)

[7]Edward Ignas and Raymond Corsini. ALTERNATIVE EDUCATIONAL SYSTEMS (Itasca, Ill.: Peacock Publishers, 1976.)

[8]Raywid, pp. 684-688.